Eliminating the Danger

What can we do to prevent a nuclear catastrophe?

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Nuclear arms control has recently suffered serious setbacks. The suspended START negotiations between the United States and Russia, the Senate's rejection of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), United States plans to withdraw from the ABM treaty, nuclear weapon tests by India and Pakistan, and a planned new submarine program in China--all these threaten to undermine important strides made in the 1980s and early 1990s. What explains the successes of that period? What accounts for the current dire trend? And what might be done to reverse it?

The previous essays in this forum offer diverse, sometimes conflicting answers to the first two questions. They point to the following factors as important elements in those answers.

1. *Popular protest movements*. Examining arms control during the Reagan administration, Lawrence Wittner argues that the political pressure exerted by the vast United States and European grassroots antinuclear movement forced Reaganites to move from an anti-arms-control to a pro-arms-control position.

2. *Values and decisions of individual political leaders*. Portraying Mikhail Gorbachev as a "utopian visionary," Vladislav Zubok argues that Gorbachev's unilateral concessions were the key to the arms control successes of the 1980s.

3. *Mobilizing effects of military threats to US territory*. Jonathan Schell notes that the end of the Cold War deprived us of "the vocabulary and concepts--political, military, and moral"--we used to perceive the danger of nuclear war. When the Cold War ended and the frightening image of mutual United States-Russian "nuclear deterrence" faded, we failed to develop a new image of the on-going

deterrence" faded, we failed to develop a new image of the on-going and still very real danger of a nuclear holocaust.

4. *Interactive national patterns of arming and disarming*. Sergey Rogov argues that quantitative reductions only work in a bipolar environment of the sort that existed during the Cold War and disappeared with the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

In this essay, I propose to integrate these factors in a coherent overview. Then, drawing on the lessons learned and noting several recent nuclear weapon developments, I will suggest some constructive steps for renewed efforts to reduce and eventually eliminate the danger of nuclear war.

Why the Successes?

In accounting for social change, political analysts often debate the relative importance of popular social change movements, on the one hand, and extraordinary political leaders, on the other. When long-awaited reform occurs, is it the broad climate and readiness for change that is decisive, or may a particularly effective individual leader be all-important, either acting alone or in concert with broader pressure for change?

Wittner makes a strong case that the decisive factor in the nuclear arms control successes of the 1980s was the popular protest movement. As one of the founders and leaders of the US Nuclear Weapon Freeze Campaign--and a participant in hundreds of panels, debates, and media interviews about the nuclear arms race and the freeze proposal between 1980 and1988, often arguing with senior Reagan officials or supporters--I was well aware of the hostility of the Reagan administration toward the antinuclear protesters. But before reading Wittner's account, I had no idea that Reagan and his cabinet gave so much attention to protest movements in the United States and Europe, or of the lengths to which Reagan and company went to recapture public, congressional, and European government support on security issues.

Wittner shows that Reagan officials were worried because, in their view, the United States and European public protest movements dominated the political and security concerns of the governments and opposition parties in Europe, dominated US public opinion in the run up to the 1984 and 1986 elections, and were influencing members of Congress on issues of military spending and arms procurement. In an effort to offset these successes of the protest movements, Reagan officials publicly embraced arms control in the form of their proposals for the INF Treaty (abolishing intermediate-range nuclear weapons in Europe) and the talks on Strategic Arms Reductions (START I and START II).

Wittner also makes an even stronger claim, which, in my view,

considerably overstates his case: he says that the INF Treaty was concluded largely because the United States and European popular movements brought enough pressure to bear to change their governments' decision to deploy weapons. Yet he notes that "the turning point came in late February 1987, when *Gorbachev* offered to separate" the INF Treaty from other nuclear weapon issues (my emphasis). Moreover, as Wittner also notes, the Reagan administration (and, probably, the European governments of the time) believed that the INF "zero option" they proposed in November 1981 was a position the Soviets would never accept. The Reaganites were hoisted by their own petard when the Soviets finally accepted the zero option, as well as several subsequent additional conditions the West piled on during the course of the talks on in a futile effort to make them fail.

Another sign of the protest movement's moderate impact on Reagan is Reagan's response to his own growing awareness of the danger of nuclear war: this was was to trust to SDI to protect us--not to reduce or abolish nuclear weapons in an effort to reduce the danger.

These facts support Zubok's view--that extraordinary concessions by Gorbachev led to the nuclear arms control successes of the 1980s, particularly the INF Treaty. Key to the final INF agreement was a willingness by Gorbachev not only to accept asymmetrical reductions but also to set aside Soviet concerns about SDI.

Still, I think Zubok's interpretation goes too far in the other direction, for two reasons. First, Gorbachev's views on nuclear weapons and nuclear arms control were a product not only of the Chernobyl disaster, but also of the advice and information given to him by physicists and political scientists who had long and extensive interaction with Western arms control advocates and actively supported nuclear arms reductions. Zubok mentions these factors, but gives them too little weight. Second, on close inspection, Zubok's criticism of Gorbachev as a messianic visionary actually applies only to Gorbachev's *non-nuclear* military policies. An extraordinary decision little known in the West--Gorbachev's general renunciation of the use of force both inside and outside the Soviet Union, announced at the United Nations in December 1988--led to consequences that Gorbachev himself never expected: complete Soviet military withdrawal from Eastern Europe, the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, and, ultimately (in Zubok's words), "the rapid and peaceful disappearance of the Soviet Union from the political map." By comparison, Gorbachev's policies on nuclear weapons were moderate and very much in consonance with the arms control thinking of the time. The reductions he accepted in the INF and START treaties had the effect of widening the steps in the ladder of escalation from a possible conventional war in Europe to a global nuclear holocaust, thereby reducing the risk that a nuclear war might occur. At the same time, the reductions left thousands, probably tens of thousands, of

nuclear weapons in place on both sides. They were part of a larger policy of decreasing reliance on nuclear deterrence and working toward nuclear disarmament in modest, incremental steps.

Evidence that *both* political leadership and popular protest movements were critical to the nuclear arms reduction successes of the 1980s can be found in the fate of several nuclear arms control initiatives undertaken earlier and later. The late 1970s give us an example of a willing and able political leader lacking the support of a visible popular protest movement and a broad climate for change: Jimmy Carter completed negotiations on the SALT II Treaty, stopped development of the original B-1 bomber, and reversed the Pentagon's decision to deploy the "neutron bomb" in Europe. Lacking the support of a visible popular antinuclear movement, however, he was unable to persuade the majority-Democrat Senate to ratify SALT II. And his decisions not to proceed with two nuclear weapon programs cost him political capital in Washington and probably contributed to his loss to Reagan in the 1980 presidential election.

The early 1990s offer an example of political leaders prepared to undertake radical change, but this time in the highly supportive environment created by the United States and European protest movements. In 1991, in reciprocal unilateral actions, Bush and Gorbachev withdrew the many thousands of nuclear weapons previously dispersed among their conventional military forces, including nuclear land-mines, nuclear anti-ship and anti-submarine torpedoes and depth charges, short-range nuclear missiles, and nuclear shells for howitzers with a range of twenty to thirty miles. For nuclear weapons, this was a watershed event, comparable in magnitude to Gorbachev's withdrawal of forces from Eastern Europe. Far more than the INF Treaty, it "widened the firegap" between conventional war and nuclear war, and made the risk of escalation of any East-West confrontation to nuclear war much less likely. Moreover, it represented the direct reversal of a forty-year "nuclear warfighting" policy of steadily narrowing the steps in the ladder of escalation. Yet because of the antinuclear climate, it passed as a unilateral initiative without debate or challenge, indeed virtually without notice.

From this one initiative, we can conclude that even if the United States and European protest movements did not persuade Reagan to embrace nuclear arms control in actions as well as words and the INF success was, indeed, due to exceptional unilateral concessions by Gorbachev, these movements *did* persuade (or at least permit)Bush to engage in genuine, unilateral but reciprocal reductions (the most far-reaching form of nuclear arms control) and to support actively the conclusion of two strategic arms reduction treaties. True, the START II Treaty involved cuts that fell much more heavily on Russia than on the United States. But this treaty was signed by Yeltsin, not Gorbachev, in the expectation (also held by Gorbachev and US treaty supporters) that

the expectation (also held by Gorbachev and US treaty supporters) that it would be a mere stepping stone to a START III treaty, with even deeper cuts, which would restore a balance.

What Went Wrong?

In the 1990s, the entire nuclear arms control process laboriously built up since 1960 collapsed. START II has not been ratified or implemented. Talks on START III have not begun. The main countries that the NPT was intended to prevent from acquiring nuclear arms--Israel, North Korea, some Arab countries, India, and Pakistan--have begun or completed programs to build and test nuclear weapons. The US Senate voted down the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which had been negotiated for forty years. And the US government is now prepared to abandon the ABM Treaty in order to deploy a new national missile defense system.

What went wrong? Was it a lack of popular movements *and* a lack of political leadership, or something more?

Popular opposition to nuclear weapon programs and support for nuclear arms reductions has shrunk to a very small fraction of its former size. Clinton and Yeltsin were weak leaders in general, and neither took any special initiative or showed any deep concern on nuclear arms issues. At the same time, Clinton was blocked from even modest progress on nuclear arms control by the majority-Republican Senate and the vigorous opposition of Senator Jesse Helms, chairman of the key Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Helms' financial and "advise and consent" stranglehold on foreign policy has obliged Clinton to select a small number of priorities, and nuclear arms control has not been one of them.

Are these points sufficient to account for the collapse of arms control, or are there other important factors? I agree with Schell that the end of the Cold War left people without a framework for perceiving the enduring danger of nuclear war, but would add that the danger is less in some ways and less in some regions while greater in others. The withdrawal of the shorter-range "tactical" nuclear weapons from United States (and Russian) foreign military bases and the reduction in the numbers of deployed United States and Russian strategic intercontinental nuclear warheads have, in fact, reduced the risks of an inadvertent or uncontrolled escalation of a political crisis into an all-out nuclear holocaust. The urban centers of the United States, Russia, and Europe can still be wiped out in thirty minutes, but the likelihood of such an attack is not as great as it once was. The spread of nuclear capabilities in the Middle East and South Asia increases the risk of nuclear catastrophe in those areas--but not in the regions that saw the vast protest movements of the 1980s.

Moreover, for the most part, the nations concerned have restrained nuclear testing, production, and deployment in the same way that they

would have if the nuclear arms control agreements were formally ratified and fully in effect. The United States and Russia have kept their strategic nuclear forces close to the START II limits. The signatories to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT)have all stopped testing nuclear weapons and show no sign of resuming. No country that has signed and ratified the Nonproliferation Treaty has withdrawn in order to acquire nuclear weapons. North Korea threatened to withdraw, but has "suspended" its withdrawal. And the new nuclear states (Israel, India, and Pakistan) had all refused to sign unless and until much greater progress was made toward nuclear disarmament on the part of the United States and Russia.

Still, the world has been coasting on past successes. There are signs of much more dangerous new developments if we do not get arms control back on track. But Rogov suggests that it is going to be particularly difficult to revive arms control because all arms control restraints to date have built on two models, neither of which is helpful for the near future: two party equal cuts (or equal ceilings), and multi-party bans. Previous *nuclear* arms control agreements included a slight adaptation: they involved either two-party US-Russian limits or the multi-party bans, such as in the Nonproliferation Treaty and the CTBT; but the latter recognized Britain, France, and China as nuclear-weapon states whose much smaller arsenals were not subject to specific agreed limits for the moment.

Now, Rogov says, we face a world in which Russia cannot be considered equal to the United States, China is going to become more powerful, and the policies of additional countries (at a minimum, India, Pakistan, and Israel) must be taken into account. In such a world, Rogov argues, neither equal numbers nor a complete ban will be helpful as a goal or a model for near-future arms control agreements.

Rogov's point is well taken, but I am more optimistic on this score than he is. Even during the Cold War, the two-party nuclear reduction framework was expected to lead, ultimately, to a situation in which the arsenals of the United States and Russia would be no greater than those of Britain, France, and China. While equal and declining ceilings among the five were always assumed to be the goal, the idea that the United States would accept equality with China, or even with Britain and France, was as implausible politically then as it is today. But that did not stop progress toward this goal, nor preclude confidence that we would cross the bridge of multi-party reductions when we came to it.

This brings us to the remaining factors in the arms control equation. One of these--the United States's definition of its role, its rights, and its obligations as the world's sole superpower--is playing an increasingly important role and deserves to be front-and-center in our

consideration of the prospects for arms control in the next decade or two. A final, related factor is neglected by the other authors. That is the potential future role of other wealthy industrial nations, particularly the nations that make up the European Union, in arms control.

The US government's response to the end of the Cold War, though not surprising, is, nonetheless, deeply disappointing. Throughout the Cold War, peace and arms control advocates strongly suspected that references to the Soviet or communist threat as the justification for US military spending and arms procurement were merely excuses for what was, in reality, a traditional "power politics" approach to international affairs. Now that the Soviet and communist threats are completely eliminated, this suspicion has been confirmed. Being the militarily most powerful country in the world has become an end in itself, whose only function is to provide decision-making authority or influence--to the extent that military power is relevant--in various crises and political developments around the world. In other words, the goal of US military policy, including its nuclear-weapon policy, is to have more freedom of action, and more political clout, than any other country in the world.

Rogov puts his finger on this quality when he cites the 1999 Annual Report of the US Secretary of Defense William Cohen, which states that one of the main goals of US innovation in military capabilities is to provide "freedom of action--freedom from attack and freedom to attack." A key component in this endeavor is the development of new ballistic missile defenses, both shorter-range "theater" defense systems to use with American troops deployed overseas, and longer-range "national" defense systems to protect against possible attacks by countries with small nuclear arsenals.

This most recent incarnation of missile defense, following the ultimately banned ABM developments of the 1960s and the costly, fruitless SDI studies of the 1980s, is, more than any other single factor, likely to put a permanent end to nuclear arms control. At the same time, this program is likely to stimulate an unprecedented global proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. These dangerous possibilities took a step closer to reality in December, when China announced that, in response to the American decision to proceed with its missile defense program, China will build six nuclear-powered submarines, each carrying sixteen missiles with six nuclear warheads on each missile--that is, a total of 576 nuclear warheads. While small by United States and Russian standards, this prospective nuclear build-up in China represents another watershed event, and is an almost certain trigger to comparable nuclear buildups in India, Pakistan, and possibly other countries. Until now, China has been the only country in the world with a genuine "minimum deterrent" nuclear arsenal. Having first acquired nuclear weapons in 1964 China remained

Having first acquired nuclear weapons in 1964, China remained content for 35 years with an arsenal that comprised some twenty nuclear warheads and twenty missiles, kept on "de-alert" status, with the missiles stored in, and protected by, deep caves, not in position ready to fire with the warheads on them. This small force could not be assured of penetrating the proposed new US national missile defenses, and therefore China is planning to build a larger force which will be able to do so. India is likely to want to keep pace with China, and Pakistan will want to keep pace with India.

The United States missile defense program has also made Russia reluctant to ratify the START II treaty. Yet the United States is leaning hard on Russia to accept the program (and related weakening of the ABM treaty), offering to help Russia build its own light national missile defense, and even to assist in putting multiple warheads on a new missile now under development in Russia (contravening the terms of START II). Such moves would, of course, greatly exacerbate the incentives for China to complete its planned build-up of long-range nuclear weapons.

As Schell points out, when the Cold War ended, the United States made a decision to retain thousands of nuclear weapons, even though the original purpose of their existence had vanished. With the deployment of missile defenses, the United States will not only close the door to the abolition of nuclear weapons within the next several decades, but also spur the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and, more specifically, the dramatic build up of now-small nuclear arsenals. The Clinton administration has taken the lead to move in this direction, and, not surprisingly, the policy has overwhelming bipartisan support in Congress.

The problem for nuclear arms control is that the end of the Cold War, combined with the decline in popular concern about nuclear weapons and the lack of leadership by the Clinton administration, seems to have brought out the worst in United States thinking on foreign policy. Instead of heading for demilitarization, internationalization, power-sharing--that is, efforts to give the United Nations the role in security matters that it was originally designed to have (with substantial US support)--the United States political leadership and the public have chosen military superiority as their preferred new instruments. In fact, arms control efforts were long intended in part as a means of dampening this vein in US thinking, which has now become dominant.

Windows of Hope

Beyond the gloomy present, there are some windows of hope on the horizon, which may help shift the general drift of US foreign policy in coming years, and revive arms control:

1. *Early tests of the national missile defense system have failed.* Clinton has scheduled a "go/no go" decision on production for July

2000, and the poor test results create an opportunity for a "no go" choice, which would at least delay the program.

2. *A five-year review conference of the Nonproliferation Treaty will take place in May 2000.* The non-nuclear parties to this treaty have been increasingly unified in pressing for progress in nuclear arms reductions on the part of the United States and Russia. The review conference may bring more pressure to bear on Clinton to make the "no go" choice.

3. *The member countries of the European Union have been moving toward developing a unified defense policy.* They may also oppose the US moves toward sacrificing arms control on the altar of missile defense.

4. *United States and Russian presidential elections in 2000 may lead to some new opportunities for arms control.* Vladimir Putin, while not an arms control enthusiast, may bring greater stability and control to the Russian government than it had under Boris Yeltsin. He may work harder for steps that might encourage Western economic investment. In the United States, a victory for Vice-President Gore would offer a major new opening, because as a senator in the 1980s, Gore was a leader in nuclear arms control efforts and gave them a high priority.

5. *There may be a resurgence of the popular grassroots antinuclear movement.* This could develop either in support of a Gore presidency or in reaction to an anti-arms control Republican president. Concern about the rejection of the CTBT, nuclear proliferation in South Asia, and likely effects of missile defense deployment are all likely to fuel such a renewal.

If there were a convergence of several favorable developments, what goals should we set for nuclear arms reductions in the new unipolar, or multi-polar, world? Unlike Rogov, I believe that the long-standing agenda remains relevant and helpful. We need to achieve Russian ratification of START II and initial implementation of that treaty, which should be superceded as rapidly as possible by a START III treaty that makes much deeper cuts in strategic nuclear weapons. The United States should abandon its national missile defense program, and reaffirm its commitment to the ABM Treaty. The US Senate should pass the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, with which we are already complying. The United States and Russia should jointly develop a plan for the reduction and eventual elimination of stockpiles of fissile material. China should be persuaded to drop its new submarine project; and some means should be found to reform the Nonproliferation Treaty regime and bring India, Pakistan, and Israel on board--if necessary, as nuclear states.

With half a chance, nuclear arms control could actually play a more

momentous role than it did in the past: It could revitalize step-by-step global progress toward the elimination of nuclear weapons. The worry now is that unless there is a turn for the better soon, things could get very much worse. The deployment in this country and in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East of long- and short-range anti-missile defenses developed by the United States, and the new nuclear arms race among China, India, and Pakistan could spur even more dangerous proliferation of both nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. In comparison to that horrific future, the twentieth century might look in retrospect like a relatively peaceful world.

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